

MY SAY: Treat maids with respect and dignity

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Ask any 18-year-old Malaysian girl from a middle-income urban family background if she would be willing to clean, wash and cook daily for a family for less than RM800 per month, and chances are she will say: "No thanks". Not even if she were offered the "privileges" that she enjoys at home — her own room, phone and Internet access, unlimited food supply, and time off with her friends.

But if full-time foreign maids are willing to do the job without the comforts of a privileged environment, why pay them less than RM800?

Is it because they come from a remote village in a foreign country?

Some would argue that they do not deserve that salary as they are not well trained. But what about our daughters who would turn down such an offer? After all, a housemaid is no more than an extra pair of hands to help out with some of the household chores. The trained ones are professional house managers and cost much more.

It would be better if we set up centres to train locals to manage a house so that we can wean ourselves of our dependence on foreign maids. With a basic pay of RM800, my guess is that many would be keen to take up the offer. After all, this is what a semi-skilled factory worker gets today. But still, it will be a non-starter if we are sticky about the pay. Hence, the state we are in today.

Horror stories of maids being abused fill our newspapers with increasing frequency. What about those that go unreported? Personally, I have seen families eating merrily at restaurants with a teenager who looks like a "maid" seated at the same table, but with no food before her. She has to feed the younger children or watch the family members gorge themselves. I realise that this is perhaps the mildest form of "abuse" compared with the other types of abuse that some maids have to endure. This includes not giving them wholesome meals or forcing them to consume food that is against their cultural and religious beliefs.

This may be the tip of the iceberg, but any incident of abuse and inhumane treatment is one too many. It tells a story of what kind of people we are when we cannot treat others the way we want to be treated, just because they are paid a meagre sum.

Worse is our bigotry after accepting the maids into our homes. We will scream discrimination at the slightest hint of it, while having no qualms doing the same thing day-in and day-out. We could not care less, as long as we are not the victims.

We tend to discriminate against maids based on their country of origin. If they come from a certain country, we are quick to label them as home wreckers! We seem to ignore the fact that everyone has the potential to be one (including ourselves), if we allow it. But ironically, these home wreckers are allowed to work in other sectors, as though they only operate as home wreckers when they are hired as maids.

When I was growing up, my parents taught us to treat our hired helpers (they were not called maids) as part of the family. They were not servants or slaves. We addressed them as kakak or makcik and we ate the same food together at the same table, watched TV together, shared stories and gossip, went marketing and shopping — just like a family.

Of course, there were "skirmishes" now and then, but the guilty party (usually us) were quickly disciplined.

As we grew up, we came to appreciate their help, and became attached to them long after they left. We learnt that familial help was not easy to come by and those who were willing to give a helping hand should be treated with the utmost respect and dignity, even if we were unable to pay them well. For most maids today, this is what they are looking for — respect and dignity. Maybe, this is what is missing today.

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